

# Chapter VIII

## Conversation Theory: Blended Course Design and Discussion

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### ABSTRACT

*The goal of the chapter is to examine a way in which Pask's conversation theory (CT) can be used as a theoretical framework for designing blended courses using a collaborative inquiry approach for teaching and learning in a campus-based university. This chapter comprises three parts that explain (a) the constructs of CT and their relations in regard to online collaborative inquiry, (b) the four principles derived from the constructs of CT and the possible use of these principles to design a blended course, and (c) how the effects of these constructs can be used to assess the effectiveness of this CT based blended course design. This chapter is concluded with the discussion and implications for course design and future research on CT.*

### INTRODUCTION

To cope with the fast moving globalization economy, university graduates are expected to possess the abilities to think, to solve problems, to work in collaboration, and to use computer technology for life long learning (Development of Education in Canada, 2001). In other words, in the workplace, collaborative inquiry is required to resolve issues across the borders internationally

on the Internet, such as asynchronous conferencing. The inquiry involves consensus building via both online and face-to-face discussion. The life long learning involves learning to think through the contradicting perspectives of the discussants via discursive conversation. Collaborative inquiry and the use of computer mediated communication (CMC) for online discussion are advocated in higher education. Pask's conversation theory is one of the influential theories that explain the

cognitive processes of learning in conversation and the impacts of the use of technology on cognition. Using this theory for designing courses that incorporate both online and face-to-face discussion may facilitate university graduates to meet the expectation in the workplace.

This chapter aims to explain and discuss a way in which Pask's conversation theory (CT) can be used as a theoretical framework for designing blended courses that use a collaborative inquiry approach for teaching and learning.

A blended course is a university course designed to use asynchronous conferencing or online discussion as an after class learning activity that serves as a support for teaching and learning in the face-to-face classroom of campus based universities, for example, McGill University of Canada. Blended courses that comprise online discussion as a learning activity for collaborative inquiry are increasingly operated in these universities. Yet, agreeing with educational researchers, and practitioners (e.g., Henri, 1992; Bonk & King, 1998; Palloff & Pratt, 1999), Laferrière, Murphy, and Campos (2005) state that online collaborative learning for face-to-face courses in campus-based universities requires further research. The implication is that blended courses are not well designed because the major characteristic of online collaborative inquiry is not well explained or efficiently used in the form of online discussions.

In congruence with a body of literature (e.g., Gunawardena, Lowe, & Anderson, 1998; Hara, Bonk, & Angeli, 2000; Thomas, 2002), a result of my literature survey (Leung, 2005) indicates that results of research on online discussion report failure that derives from the lack of student participation or involvement in online discussion. Serving as a learning activity, similar to face-to-face discussion, online discussion is expected to contain discursive interactions. Unlike face-to-face discussion, participation may not be voluntary, especially, in a large group discussion. In online discussion, messages are often posted

but have limited responses to them, or the conversation may not be on topic. In other words, collaborative inquiry seldom occurs, either the discursive conversation does. Students focus on completing learning tasks such as an assignment on or before the due date and the completion is considered to be their learning outcomes rather than the discussion itself or the learning processes. The failure reported indicates a major flaw of the design of blended course.

This flaw, likely, originates from the lack of the understanding of the cognitive processes involved in collaborative inquiry in which conversational interaction gives rise to cognition or concept formation. This posts a challenge for the designing blended courses and indicates a knowledge gap that hampers (a) the implementation of discussion, particularly online discussion, for collaborative inquiry in a blended course and (b) designing blended courses that are capable to combine online discussion with the face-to-face in class learning activities. To bridge this gap, Pask's CT can make a contribution because this theory explains what conversational interaction is, and, importantly, elaborates the cognitive processes involved in this interaction. Pask's explanation and elaboration can provide a strong theoretical framework to structure instructional design that integrates discussion into courses and to frame research into the integration.

Pask's CT explains and structures collaborative inquiry in terms of communication and cognition. His theory integrates applied cognition into a learning theory that can be used to design courses that foster technology supported collaborative inquiry and thinking (Laurillard, 2002). CT is about learning in conversations that involves the interaction of various cognitive processes and of external factors that have impacts on cognition.

According to Pask (1976), learning in a conversation involves at least two participants and concerns with how a problem is solved, that is, why and how methods for solving this problem are selected and used. Agreeing with Pask, scholars

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